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Tan Sitong's Invention of Historical Agency
in Late Qing China

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R e s e a r c h A r t i c l e

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Abstract

To explore how Chinese Buddhists acted as trailblazers of Engaged Buddhism, I shall analyze a late nineteenth-century thinker, Tan Sitong 譚嗣同 (1865–1898). The focus of my analysis is his masterpiece, *Renxue* 仁學. From his position of Buddhist eclecticism, Tan discoursed at length on non-differentiation as the truth of the universe to reflect on the creative disposition of human agency. He described in *Renxue* how this disposition would contribute to the agendas defining Chinese modernity. In addition, discussing the meanings of non-differentiation, Tan also generalized about the nature of the human agency he attempted to advocate: while he perceived the human agency blessed with a non-differentiating mindset as an omnipotent history-making force, he also argued that it did not confer upon its owner the status of world savior. In fact, in his view, the efficacy of a non-differentiating mind was determined by the world it aimed to help. Tan's signature piece, I argue, provides a lens through which we can observe modern Chinese Buddhism's role as an important part of the global formation of Engaged Buddhism.

Introduction

Buddhist activism, especially Engaged Buddhism, has been an important topic among scholars since the early 1990s. While much attention was paid to the development of Engaged Buddhism in places including Southeast Asia, South Asia, Japan, and the West, scholars have, in recent years, begun to examine the role of Chinese Buddhism in the global history of Engaged Buddhism (e.g., Huang, 2003). In addition, current scholarship also notes the significant parallels between modern Chinese Buddhism and Engaged Buddhism, analyzing how modern Chinese Buddhists proposed Buddhist reform that heralded the arrival of Engaged Buddhism. (1) Continuing this line of research, I would like to explore the question of how, like Ven. Mohottivatte Guananda and Henry Olcott, Chinese Buddhist-based historical actors can also be viewed as trailblazers of Engaged Buddhism. I shall analyze a late nineteenth-century thinker, Tan Sitong 譚嗣同 (1865–1898), and focus on his masterpiece, *Renxue* 仁學 (*An exposition of benevolence*), which was to be admired by Buddhist and non-Buddhist Chinese historical actors in the generations to come. (2)

Much has been said about how Tan Sitong helped construct the agendas defining Chinese modernity, including individualism (the individual's liberation), nationalism (reformism for national self-strengthening), and cosmopolitanism (commitment to the world) (Chang Hao, 1987; Li Guochi, 1997; Wang Yue, 1990). In this paper, rather than expand on this familiar issue, I would concentrate on another main thread of *Renxue*, Tan's imagining of historical agency. This is worth examining for a couple of reasons. First, if individualism, nationalism, and cosmopolitanism were embraced by a great many Chinese thinkers, they surely theorized on the human agency necessary for the pursuit of these agendas in disparate ways because of

ideological, philosophical, or personal differences. Second, and perhaps more importantly, it is clear that in *Renxue*, Tan was not merely interested in building a historical agency addressing specific modern Chinese agendas. He was also committed to generalizing about the nature of a human agency that engaged in history with its ability and willingness to cope with human needs and suffering (Tan [1896–97] 1998, pp.67–75; 243–6).

To analyze *Renxue*, I focus on how Tan described the creative disposition—the capacity for changing realities and even charting new courses for history—of his cherished human agency. By exploring the ontological, social-political, and philosophical-religious meanings of non-differentiation, I argue, Tan in *Renxue* built a human agency whose creativity pivoted upon a mental mode that was non-analytical and non-discriminating in nature, and which found expression in the support it granted to the agendas of saving the Chinese individual, the Chinese nation, and the world. This human agency, I also contend, appeared as a bearer of salvation whose efficacy was nevertheless determined by the multitude as the object of salvation. I shall emphasize, in addition, that Buddhism played a crucial role in the formation of Tan's theory of historical agency.

An examination of the role of Buddhism in *Renxue* seems, *prima facie*, unnecessary, as established wisdom has it that if Tan's masterpiece is very Buddhist, it is also highly hybrid in nature, and various trends, including Daoism, Confucianism, Christianity, and Western science and thought, were all important for its creation. (3) Although this article is not aimed at a comprehensive examination of the place of Buddhism in *Renxue* in relation to other strands of thought, I shall show that Tan Sitong occupied a complex position in how he used the concept of non-differentiation to theorize on the issue of historical agency.

In my analysis, Tan was not a syncretist who, according to Judith Berling, integrated other traditions' elements in his own religion by a process of selection and reconciliation. He was, instead, an eclectic, defined by Berling as someone who blended other trends' practices, concepts, and symbols into his/her own distinctive or rather idiosyncratic whole (Berling 1980, pp.9-13). (4) But I shall argue that Tan was a Buddhist eclectic. I use the term "Buddhist eclectic" not because of his openly declared Buddhist identity. Nor do I prefer it for the reason that in *Renxue* Tan said time and again that Buddhism was the highest of all religions. The term is adopted because Tan intentionally or inadvertently wrote at the interface between eclecticism and Buddhism in constructing his historical agency. On the one hand, he situated his analysis of historical agency in a conceptual framework based on a fusion of various trends, including Confucianism, Neo-Confucianism, Daoism, Mohism, Christianity, and modern Western science and thought. But on the other, he tended to privilege Buddhism. Although he cited profusely from non-Buddhist sources and praised them generously, he sometimes also felt it necessary to clarify or criticize them. Buddhism was the only source he did not criticize in *Renxue*. More importantly, while Tan unequivocally identified Buddhism, Christianity, and the thought of Confucius as the best of all traditions, his theory on historical agency encapsulated a new vision of social-political relationships that was most congruent with his rendition of Buddhism. Last but not least, to a visible extent, in *Renxue* Tan tended to spotlight Buddhism in his exposition of such important issues as self-other relationship and the spiritual nature of human agency. As a result, Buddhism became a "de-centered" center in Tan's Buddhist-eclectic theory on historical agency.

My arguments will unfold in the core sections of this paper, following a quick examination of the milieu in

which Tan Sitong wrote. The first core section ("Benevolence [*ren*] and Interconnectivity [*tong*]") analyzes how Tan used the concept of non-differentiation and related ideas to depict the ontological truth of the universe. The second, third and fourth sections ("Fighting for and Looking Beyond the Individual's Self-expression," "Working to Serve Others as Individuals," and "Working for China and the World") discuss how, with his understanding of that truth, he unraveled his ideas about historical agency. And the fifth section ("Spirituality and Human Agency") dissects how Tan accentuated but also circumscribed the immense capacity of his beloved agency in the course of history-making. In the conclusion, I shall discuss how Tan Sitong's Buddhist eclecticism and historical agency allow us to rethink existing scholarship on Tan, modern Chinese Buddhism, and Chinese modernity. More importantly, I shall ponder the significance of Tan Sitong in the modern and contemporary world where Buddhism, especially in the form of Engaged Buddhism, has emerged as a rising global force for change.

Milieu

Tan Stong was born in 1868 to a Hunanese family in Beijing, where his father, Tan Jixun 譚繼洵(1823–1901), a man from Liuyang 瀏陽, enjoyed upward mobility in the imperial bureaucracy. He received a Confucian and Neo-Confucian education under the tutelage of Ouyang Zhonggu 歐陽中鵠 (1849–1911) and Liu Renxi 劉人熙 (1844–1919), both well-respected scholars who later supported his reform agendas. Being an intellectually rebellious student, however, he decided to venture beyond the Confucian tradition to study other trends, including Mohism and Daoism (Jia 2004, pp.101).

As a curious scholar who came of age in the late nineteenth century, Tan inevitably displayed a keen interest in Western culture. His enthusiasm for Western

learning intensified especially after China's defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War. Tan's thoughts on Western scientific knowledge, among other things, can be found in *Shijuying lu bishi* (*Notes from the Studio of the Chrysanthemum-Ink's Shadow* 石菊影廬筆識), which consists of random notes he wrote before turning thirty. After abandoning the ethnocentric perspective on reform and the world he had expressed in earlier works like *Zhiyan* (*On Governing the World* 治言), he became strongly attracted to Christianity, which, with the efforts of missionaries and Chinese converts, got involved in China's projects of modernization and national salvation (Dunch 2001, pp.112–47; Lian 2006/7, pp.199–216; Shek, 1976).

But Tan's stay in Nanjing as an expectant official made Buddhism dear to his heart. Haunted by the grim prospects in officialdom, Tan met Yang Wenhui 楊文會 (1837–1911), one of the most prominent lay Buddhists of modern China, and soon became fascinated with Buddhism, which he had learned to appreciate in Beijing when he befriended Wu Tieqiao 吳鐵樵 (1866–1897), a reformist scholar from Sichuan. Active in modernization projects in Nanjing, Shanghai, and Liuyang, which were parts of the localized reform movements that preceded the state-launched reform in 1898, Tan also made time to examine and practice Buddhism.

One of his letters to Ouyang Zhonggu, a substantial part of which was to be incorporated into *Renxue*, vividly shows his excitement over Buddhism at a time when he was also appreciative of Jesus: "I took a serious vow to recite the mantras and to stride forth on the spiritual path...tirelessly and ceaselessly...." He described his spiritual progress, thinking that he was on the verge of developing supersensory power (*shentong*, *abhijñā* 神通) (Tan [1896] 1981, p.461). Extolling Buddhism as the religion that would "govern and bring peace to the

world," he refused to belittle Confucianism, emphasizing that it should have the capacity for the same magnitude of influence. However, he hastened to make his point that the thought of Confucius had already been eroded by unworthy Confucian scholars, an idea he still held when he wrote *Renxue* (Tan [1896–97] 1998, pp.207–8). He therefore guessed: "Perhaps Buddhism could be relied upon for the revival of his profound thought" (Tan [1896] 1981, pp.461–66). He also regretted: "[Despite my progress,] my spiritual foundation is still less than solid. Once I have to deal with those from officialdom, I lose my equanimity" (Tan [1896] 1981, pp.461–66).

But speaking of Tan's enthusiasm for Buddhism, it should be noted that according to Asian scholars like Naitō Konan, Inanba Iwakichi, and Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929), modern Chinese intellectuals were drawn to Buddhism as a vehicle for helping China (Chan 1985, p.161; Mori, 2002). This observation is to a significant extent accurate. (5) However, I would like to point out that "Buddhist utilitarianism" did not always preclude a true commitment to Buddhism, as shown in cases like Yang Wenhui, a devout Buddhist who also argued for the importance of Buddhism for China. (6) Besides, it is by no means a novel fact that Chinese scholars, though steeped in the Confucian tradition, could be authentically Buddhist. One very good example is Peng Shaosheng 彭紹升 (1740–1798). (7)

In addition, as existing scholarship shows, to function in a culture where Buddhism was not mainstream, Chinese Buddhists had trained themselves to address other schools of thought. Whereas some Buddhist thinkers (for instance, Peng Shaosheng) chose to imagine other philosophical and religious strands on Buddhist terms (Shek 1993, pp.83–112), others did not mind being eclectic. For instance, Ouyi Zhixu 藕益智旭 (1599–1655), one of the four eminent monks in late

Ming, fathomed the truth of change as revealed in the *Yijing* but refused to name what he did as either Buddhist or Confucian (Lo, 2008).

Tan Sitong studied Buddhism and wrote *Renxue* in this milieu.

Benevolence (*ren*) and Interconnectivity (*tong*)

In *Renxue*, Tan did not mean to hide his Buddhist identity, while he also expressed admiration for Confucianism, Daoism, Mohism, the *Yijing*, Neo-Confucianism, Christianity, science, and modern Western liberal-democratic thought. Echoing the typical Theosophical view, he stated that religions were reflections of the scientific Truth of the universe. However, Theosophists, including Henry Olcott who valued Buddhism more than other religions, believed that all religions were only incomplete and fragmentary reflections of the Truth (McMahan, 2004). Quite to the contrary, Tan did not doubt that Buddhism was the Truth's fullest reflection: "[Buddhism] subsumes all religions, all philosophies, all classics, all abstract and scientific disciplines..., things imperceptible by either the eye or the ear, and phenomena which can or cannot be comprehended by the [finite] human mind" (Tan [1896–97] 1998, p.204). It was from this position that he depicted the truth of the universe.

Non-differentiation as the truth of the universe

According to Tan Sitong, essential for all things in the universe was ether (*yitai* 以太). In his view, ether, though undetectable, was the basic and eternal element of the universe, the material that everything was made of, the dynamic that caused all phenomena to emerge and change, and, most importantly, the gravitational force that made things—from the immeasurable to the infinitesimal—cohere (Tan [1896–97] 1998, pp.81, 105–8).

"When it operates," Tan said, "ether is what Confucius calls *ren*..., what Mozi calls universal love (*jianai* 兼愛), [and] what the Buddha calls compassion (*cibei* 慈悲).. It is also the same as Jesus' idea that thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Tan [1896–97] 1998, p.81). And if the title of the book seems to privilege the concept of benevolence, Tan actually privileged another concept, interconnectivity (*tong* 通). Benevolence is, he stressed, first and foremost characterized by the interconnectivity between all existences, which enables them to communicate to one another. To explain, Tan gave such examples as the transmission of electricity from one locale to another and the brain's detection of the body's contact with any object (Tan [1896–97] 1998, pp.73, 84–86). On the basis of interconnectivity, Tan argued that non-differentiation—or what he also called "oneness"—marked the relationships between all things.

On the surface, therefore, Tan did not intend to assign a prime position to Buddhism in the eclectic framework he relied on to explore non-differentiation. Much has been said about how Tan appropriated a scientific term from the West, as he was inspired by the Confucian/Neo-Confucian definitions of *qi* 氣 (Wright 1994, pp.551–75; Schäfer 2001, pp.257–69). It can also be argued that he was influenced by the traditional concept of *tong*, which originated in ancient Chinese correlative thinking (Hall and Ames 1987, p.24; Tian, 2000). In addition, to illustrate the notion of non-differentiation, Tan Sitong gave a few specific examples. Borrowing Wang Fuzhi's 王夫之 (1619–1692) interpretation of the *Yijing*, he said, "The *Yijing* does not talk about existence and non-existence, but just emphasizes visibility and invisibility." Tan also clarified this point by using Confucius, who, according to him, thought that although rituals changed throughout the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties, the most ancient times in China, they shared the same roots

(Tan [1896–97] 1998, pp.107–8). Buddhism appeared to be just one among multiple sources that shaped his eclectic thought. Using Huayan philosophy in particular and Mahayana Buddhism in general, he invoked the Buddhist wisdom, "One is all, and all is one." In putting forth his view that differences could not be divorced from sameness, he also sounded Buddhist: Change was intertwined with non-change; being born was being unborn (*bushing* 不生); and being destroyed was being undestroyed (*bumie* 不滅).

However, contemplating non-differentiation, Tan also reflected critically on some of the non-Buddhist philosophical trends and ideas he deeply admired. If he did not mean to question the *Yijing* and Confucius here, he thought that the *Zhuangzi* was on the right track but still did not explain thoroughly the truth of non-differentiation. "Zhuangzi said," Tan told his readers, "Birth is followed instantly by death, and death by birth." But then he said, "I would assert that 'instantly' means that birth and death are undifferentiated" (Tan [1896–97] 1998, p.120). (8)

In *Renxue*, reflecting on non-differentiation, Tan also concentrated on time as a line of unbroken links between temporal units—the past, present, and future. And discussing the un-compartmentalized continuity of time, he, once again, tended to reflect on some of the non-Buddhist sources treasured by him. Embracing the Huayan notion of "the unity of three ages [*sanshi yishi* 三世一時]," Tan extracted a phrase from the *Zhuangzi* that says, "Day and night they change place before us...." He hastened to clarify it: "I would assert that this means that day and night are undifferentiated" (Tan [1896–97] 1998, pp.119–20). (9) He also cited Wang Fuzhi's commentary on the *Yijing*: "Today is both what the heaven and earth have become and what they will be." Though finding it congruent with the Buddhist concept of "the unity of three ages," he still wanted to delve

more deeply into the matter: "I would assert that today is not today" (Tan [1896–97] 1998, pp.119–20). The Chinese thinker whose thought he did not clarify in this textual context was Confucius. For him, when Confucius used the river as a metaphor to illustrate the passage of time, the highest of all Confucian sages got it exactly right. (10) Tan then sighed: "Scholars the world over laugh at the idea of 'the unity of three ages.' But in fact is the unquestionable truth of heaven and earth!" (Tan [1896–97] 1998, pp.125–26).

Interconnectivity in the human realm

Tan Sitong applied his ontological knowledge about non-differentiation, especially the concept of interconnectivity, to analyze the human realm. According to him, there were four kinds of interconnectivity pertaining to human situations. Like late Qing scholars such as Wei Yuan 魏源 (1794–1857) and Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858–1927), he valued the ideal of great peace (*taipingshi* 太平世), which originated in Chinese scholars' reading of the *Gongyang Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals*, and longed for the interconnectivity between China and non-Chinese nations and cultures (*zhongwai tong* 中外通). (11) Tan also introduced the interconnectivity between men and women (*nannǚ tong* 男女通), and that between the superior and the inferior (*shangxia tong* 上下通). In explaining them, he borrowed two hexagrams from the *Yijing*. The first one was the *tai* 泰 hexagram, which, by symbolizing the harmonious interaction between *yin* and *yang*, represented in Tan's eyes fruitful communications between those above and those below. The second one was the *pi* 否 hexagram, which for Tan signified the misfortunes caused by the absence of communication between the superior and the inferior. The common denominator in these various kinds of interconnectivity was that they all addressed how people who were in certain national, cultural, social,

and political positions interacted with those who were different.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Tan identified the fourth type of interconnectivity—that between oneself and the other (*renwotong* 人我通)—as foundational for the other three (Chan Sin-wai 1985, p.92; Ding 2004, p.18). While Tan obviously benefited from the exegetical tradition of the *Yijing* which applied the concept of interconnection to analyze human relationships, he chose to place emphasis on the influence of Buddhism on his concept of *renwotong*. He said clearly, "My view on the unity between one's self and the other is largely based on Buddhism." "This is because," he quoted the *Diamond Sutra* without identifying its title, "Buddhist sutras state that 'there is no form of others, nor is there a form of self'" (Tan [1896–97] 1998, p.73; translation [modified] from Chan, 1984, p.62).

Benevolence, with interconnectivity as its key property, was the ultimate state of the universe which could never be eliminated—so Tan Sitong argued. However, he also thought that benevolence could be disrupted (*luan* 亂). When members of the universe became disconnected to one another and communication between them was blocked (*butong* 不通 *sai* 塞) (Tan [1896–97] 1998, pp.73–87, 96), non-benevolence (*buren* 不仁) surfaced. Tan contemplated the mental mode human agents could develop to end disconnectedness—that is, to recover or uncover interconnectivity—in the human realm.

Fighting for and Looking Beyond the Individual's Self-expression

In *Renxue*, the search for the right mental mode is not only essential but also necessary for those who want to remove disconnection, as the human's inner world is identified as the source of non-benevolence.

Non-benevolence, Tan Sitong pointed out, was rooted in the project of naming (*ming* 名). In his view, naming was an endless process that failed to represent the reality of non-differentiation. In a manner resonating with Daoism, and the Mind-only view that the human mind limited and misrepresented reality (Sutton 1991, pp.286, 290), he argued that naming clouded people's understanding of interconnectivity. Tan criticized those "unimaginative scholars" who "wrongly create differentiations...[and] are entangled in the meaning of the names..." (translation [modified] from Chan 1984, p.77). Therefore, to restore interconnectivity, historical agents must move beyond the "analytical and discriminating mode" (*duidai* 對待), which led humans astray by covering up the interconnection between things.

Legitimizing a historical agency that struggled for self-expression

Writing *Renxue*, Tan translated his embrace of a non-analytical and non-discriminating mode into support for the individual, an attitude that reflected the influence of Western individualism and egalitarianism. Tan believed that interconnectivity could not exist as long as individuals were not allowed to express themselves—what they wanted and who they were—in both words and action. He attacked what can be considered "institutionalized disconnections"—ideas, values, and practices which were buttressed by traditional Chinese social, political, and economic structures, and which made individuals feel constrained in self-expression.

Drawing upon his understanding of non-differentiation, Tan Sitong legitimated personal desires, including materialist and sexual desire. He criticized the principle of frugality, which he believed was invented by Laozi and supported by Confucian scholars (Tan [1896–97]

1998, pp.133–34, 137–38). For him, frugality, conventionally conceptualized as the antithesis of extravagance, violated human nature (Tan [1896–97] 1998, p.145) and departed from the truth of non-differentiation. He stressed that "the difference between [frugality and extravagance] was merely an artificial invention rooted in the erroneous tendency to differentiate things (*wangsheng fenbie* 妄生分別)" (Tan [1896–97] 1998, p.137). In addition, Tan emphasized that Chinese culture contradicted the truth of non-differentiation by suppressing sexual desire. Because of the influence of the Confucian doctrine of propriety (*li* 禮), the Chinese labeled sexual desire, which was also natural (Tan [1896–97] 1998, p.101; Chan, 1984, p.86), "licentiousness (*yin* 淫)." Obedience to ritual and propriety bespoke the fact that they discriminated between human desire (*renyu* 人慾) and heavenly principle (*tianli* 天理), a false distinction which had been criticized by the late Ming scholar Wang Fuzhi, who insisted that "heavenly principle was embedded in desire." Tan found a congenial spirit in Wang, whose view, in his analysis, converged with the Buddhist theory that "all the Buddhas are the same as sentient beings; and the tathagata (*zhenru* 真如) nature is the same as avidya (*wuming* 無明)" (Tan [1896–97] 1998, p.97).

What Tan found even more deplorable was the fact that Chinese individuals' voices were suppressed as they were locked in the political, gender, and familial hierarchies. Critiquing the Three Bonds and Five Relationships (*sangang wulun* 三綱五倫), which, in his view, were also rooted in the process of naming, Tan appropriated the Western concept of self-determination (*zizhu zhi quan* 自主之權). The loss of self-determination meant that officials and the people as political subjects, sons as junior family members, and women as the oppressed gender had to submit to high-handed rules imposed on them by the authorities

(Tan [1896–97] 1998, pp.181, 197–98, 200). (12)
Consequently, according to Tan, their own voices were lost (Tan [1896–97] 1998, pp.179, 93–102).

According to *Renxue*, when Chinese individuals are stripped of their right to self-expression, interconnectivity is disrupted. By advocating a non-analytical mindset, Tan thought that the Chinese were entitled to transform themselves into historical agents who, with a modern, individualist attitude, struggled for the individual's freedom and desires. In so doing, he joined other modern writers, including Buddhist-inspired ones (Hsiao, 1975; Wang, 1997; Lee, 1973 and 1999; Li Guochi, 1997; Shi, 2001), to build a modern discourse on the individual.

Trivializing self-orientedness for non-dualism

On closer examination, however, Tan Sitong was not content with this individualistic historical agency. Many modern Chinese intellectuals supported the modern discourse on the individual out of their self-oriented frustrations in the traditional familial and social systems. While sharing with them such frustrations, Tan emphasized that the creative disposition of Chinese historical agents must not be confined to their fight for their self-expression, or for self-oriented liberation of the individual. As a matter of fact, he was not exactly happy with those whose main goal in life was to lust after pleasure and material comfort: "When conventional, uninspiring and boring people get some fine clothes or enjoy a good meal, they congratulate themselves on their good fortune and their faces beam with delight" (translation [modified] from Chan 1984, p.74).

The preoccupation with one's desires was, as Tan saw it, rooted in humans' analytical, discriminating mental mode, which was the hotbed of various but interrelated

kinds of dualism. Unable to understand the non-dualistic relationship between self and other, ordinary people clung to their selves and therefore intended to maximize their gains. Moreover, the dualistic preoccupation with self, blinding them to the non-differentiation between birth and no birth, and that between destruction and non-destruction, led to the dualistic preoccupation with life—i.e., bodily existence. Humans' dualistic passion for life created a fixation on desires: "Seeing the transience of life, they [those who love life and hate death] crave anything that pleases them." Reflecting on physical existence, Tan asserted, "When a man grows old and passes away, the particles that make up his body revert to their original form and then combine with something else to form new beings and new things." Discussing the issue of soul, he stressed, "[B]irth actually is not birth, and death not death. This is particularly true of the spiritual dimension of existence" (Tan [1896–97] 1998, p.110). (13)

But Tan also understood that soul was a difficult concept to grasp: Sometimes not even saints and sages were able to capture it to the fullest extent. Although he noted that various sources and traditions expressed a serious interest in the issue of soul (Tan [1896–97] 1998, p.110), he also pointed out that some of them might not be able to elucidate perfectly the non-dualistic relationship between soul and body. In his view, notwithstanding its concept of soul, the biblical concept of original sin, based on the assumption that humans inherit imperfection from their highest ancestors, is focused incorrectly on bodily existence. The *Yijing* also shows a similar preoccupation with bodily existence, Tan thought, though viewing it as on a par with Buddhism (Tan [1896] 1981, pp. 461–464). He pinpointed the following statement from this Chinese classic: "A family that accumulates goodness will be sure to have an excess of blessings, but one that accumulates evil will have an excess of disasters" (Tan [1896–97] 1998, p.115;

the translation of the *Yijing* quote is from Lynn, 1994, p.146). It, for him, revealed the Chinese stubborn attachment to the physical self.

If saints and sages were unable to gain full knowledge about the non-differentiation between soul and body, ordinary humans' preoccupation with life, desires, and their "well-being" had severe consequences. According to Tan Sitong, they reduced their being to one circumscribed within the quotidian existence of food, sex, wealth, fame, and status. Concerned about preserving what they had, they refused to sacrifice for greater causes. Worse still, always thinking about themselves, Tan said, they did not hesitate to compete against others for their own "well-being" (Tan [1896-97] 1998, pp.87-88, 91, 110). The achievements of these people could only be limited. In fact, they were responsible for disconnection in the human world.

Therefore, if one wants to augment one's creative power to redress the phenomenon of disconnection, one must give up the mental habit of differentiation, especially that of self-other distinction. Imagining the historical agency able to recover interconnection between humans, Tan, like other late Qing intellectuals, valued mental power (*xinli* 心力) (Ying 1998, p.305). In his letter to Ouyang Zhonggu, Tan mentioned a book that introduced the concept. Titled *The Prevention of Disease through Mental Healing*, it was written by Henry Wood and translated into Chinese by John Fryer in 1896. Tan thought its ideas were similar to those of Theravada Buddhism (Tan [1896] 1981, p.461). In *Renxue*, the mental power discussed in Wood's book was represented as the same as what the Buddhists considered "vow power" (*yuanli* 愿力) (Tan [1896-97] 1998, p.217).

According to Tan Sitong, mental power was indispensable to the world, for without it nothing could get done. He believed that everyone had mental power,

and one's intelligence determined its magnitude. But Tan also emphasized that mere mental power might not be able to redress the calamities of the world, as "heaven endows humans with fine qualities, but then humans employ these fine qualities to fight against one another" (translation [modified] from Chan, 1984, p.209). Humans should, he proposed, put mental power to good use. They should, and Tan here was far from ambiguous, rely on mental power to recover benevolence—the four kinds of interconnectivity—in the human realm. The core of vow power was none other than compassion (Tan [1896–97] 1998, pp.217, 227–28).

It is clear, then, that dear to Tan Sitong's heart were not historical actors who dared fight for their own freedom and desires, but those who, by transcending their dualistic preoccupation with self and life, dedicated themselves to the dual task of increasing their mental power (and thus deepening their compassion) and ending disconnection (and thus recovering interconnectivity) in the course of history. But how could or should one undertake such a daunting task?

Working to Serve Others as Individuals

Reflecting on Chinese society, Tan presumed that though aspiring for transcendence over sex, food, wealth, and status, historical agents who did not name and differentiate things should empathize with ordinary people's secular pursuit of pleasure and success. One of their historical missions, according to him, was to protect and work for others' right to self-expression. In this sense, Tan's branch of individualism was to a significant extent a kind of "other-oriented individualism."

Respecting others' desires

Tan's benevolent historical agency would recognize—and even work to protect—others' desires. This, undoubtedly, was to be expected, as he agreed with Wang Fuzhi's emphasis on the identity between heavenly principle and desire. But Tan's contrast with his late Ming inspiration was also visible. Considering Buddhists' disregard of wealth and fame as a misunderstanding of principle, and regarding their purging of sexual drive as an aberration that violated human relationships (Zhang Liwen 2001, pp.392–93), Wang Fuzhi presumed that to pursue desire without transgressing principle was *ren* (Black 1989, p.226). As for Tan, he cherished transcendence over bodily existence but viewed showing lenience toward self-indulgence as benevolence. He held that it was by tolerating and even commiserating with those factors—including desires—that caused disconnection that one could restore interconnectivity.

This complexity is fully revealed in his discussion on prostitution. "Should we or should we not prohibit prostitution?" he asked. Though considering whoring a vice and an excessive form of pleasure-seeking, he thought that due to the global and national prevalence of prostitution, prohibition might not be practical, and was, perhaps, too coercive an idea. "Prostitution as a phenomenon will cease to exist," he was confident, "when humans [look beyond their concern about] physical existence." But instead of discussing how people should be taught to eliminate their desire and to move beyond bodily existence, he recommended something else when he addressed the issue of how a particular kind of social agent—the government elite—should deal with prostitution in real life. He asserted that humane officials should not resort to harsh measures against this evil. If they found it difficult to eliminate prostitution, they should

sympathize with those driven so hopelessly by their sexual desire. In other words, they should accept the presence of prostitution. What lay behind his argument for acceptance is his own assumption about self-other non-distinction: A true understanding of self-other non-distinction would not encourage a truly benevolent elite to insist that others—in this case, desire-driven men—align with its own moral correctness. For such insistence, derived from one's rejection of the other's viewpoint, is a kind of differentiation.

In Tan Sitong's imagining, in addition to tolerating self-indulgent men, humane officials would also actively think about how to protect them, the prostitutes, and the good folks (those who did not share the vice) from possible hazards. For him, self-other non-distinction meant not only a genuine concern for those who appear degenerate by accepted moral standards, but also a deep commitment to all beings. Therefore, the right policy on prostitution was that the government should regulate, but should not suppress, prostitution: the number of prostitutes should be limited; certain standards of hygiene must be maintained; and prostitutes' rights must be respected. If implemented, this policy would prevent lustful men from sinking into the bottomless current of desire, and prostitutes from exploitation. This, for him, was true benevolence (Tan [1896–97] 1998, p.236)!

Tan's flexible tolerance toward all things might be based on his interpretation of more than one source. Cheng Hao 程灝 (1032–1085), who influenced Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1538), a late Ming thinker admired by Tan, assumed that heavenly principle contained morally good and morally bad, and that a truly benevolent person should be able to bear what is morally bad without entering into it (Guo 2008, p.86; Wang 2009, pp.141–43). But I would opine that Buddhism, too, may have played a significant role in

Tan's broadminded view on indulgence. Mahayana Buddhism, the tradition with which Tan was familiar, is known for its non-differentiating position on the opposites. To be sure, *Renxue* and other works by Tan do not allow his readers to gauge whether he consciously employed the Mahayana theory on skillful means, well-explored in such scriptures as the *Vimalakirti Sutra* and the *Lotus Sutra*, which discuss how enlightened beings went along with the unenlightened ones' desires to entice them to the path of spiritual pursuit. But sympathetic tolerance toward and intelligent handling of excessive mundane passion are indeed parts of the Buddhist tradition.

Abandoning hierarchies for social and political equality

Tan's benevolent historical agency would also contribute to the removal of oppressive social-political hierarchies. Tan called upon the Chinese to activate the non-analytical mental mode to purge their obedience and/or attachment to power based on social-political status, which he identified as the source of barbaric social and political oppression. And he targeted social and political authorities' practice of self-other distinction. Committed to their own selves, social and political authorities used names to pursue their self-interest: They hijacked *ren*, the name used by the Buddha, Confucius, and Jesus to revive interconnectivity, as they invented names such as loyalty 忠 (*zhong*), filial piety 孝 (*xiao*), and chastity 節 (*jie*), which purported to be concepts upholding *ren* but were in truth tools bringing out others' subservience (Tan [1896–97] 1998, p.91). Social and political authorities' irresponsible exercise of their power was a basic cause for the lack of the individual's right to self-expression (Tan [1896–97] 1998, pp.84, 100, 175).

Deeply concerned about how authorities' self-other distinction, which led to their irresponsible use of power, caused widespread suffering, Tan yearned for the day when the Chinese would free themselves from social-political labels that signified oppressive relationships, and support the principle of equality. He depicted his ideal world thus: "Emperor and subject are friends; father and son, living separately and owning their own personal properties, are friends; husband and wife, who consent to a matrimonial union, are friends" (Tan [1896-97] 1998, p.201). He appropriated the Christian image of the Kingdom of God to support his call for equality. He also believed that equality was treasured in the Chinese tradition, since the *Yijing* viewed positively the dialogue between the superior and the inferior (Tan [1896-97] 1998, p.203).

In addition, to show that equality untainted by names that signified oppressive relationships was possible, Tan reinterpreted history. According to him, Jesus and Confucius told their followers to not prioritize their conventional social roles. But although Tan regarded these two as powerful advocates of non-restrictive and egalitarian relationships, their images were overshadowed by the Sakyamuni Buddha, who freed himself from all father-son, ruler-subject, husband-wife, brother-brother relationships in a mystic and transcendent way: In *Renxue*, the Buddha never for a moment parts with his friends, as, empowered by his ability to work beyond the confines of his own body, he preaches to a countless number of people and communicates with the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas from all the worlds without leaving his lion's seat. (14) In addition, in Tan's view, if Confucius and Jesus supported the idea of transforming hierarchical relationships into egalitarian ones in the existing social and political frameworks, Buddhism encouraged humans to forsake the roles prescribed for them in these frameworks, thereby most unambiguously promoting friendship as

the organizing principle of society: "Buddhism encourages kings, subjects, husbands, fathers, mothers, wives, and brothers to leave their households and positions to enter the monastic community where they interact with one another at dharma meetings..." (Tan [1896–97] 1998, p.201).

In asking the Chinese to commit themselves to egalitarian relationships, Tan demanded a lot from those who occupied comparatively superior positions in various social-political hierarchies. He asked those in power—political, paternal, and patriarchal authorities—to move beyond self-other dualism in a self-sacrificing way: they should give up their privilege in the hierarchies, thereby transforming themselves into historical actors in support of other-oriented individualism. In fact, Tan showed much less tolerance for atrocious social and political authorities who oppressed the weak than for desire-driven individuals. He did not object to a historical agency that employed violence if its acts were directed against violent authorities. While he intended to incorporate into the universe of interconnectivity self-indulgent individuals who were likely to cause disconnection, he refused to include the tyrannical social and political superiors who thrived on the miseries of the oppressed. He chose not to ponder the disconnection between the violent agents of change and the oppressors. Though highly critical of the Manchu rulers, he accepted ethnic minorities' takeover of Han China: "They enjoyed heaven's blessings, as they did not practice footbinding" (Tan [1896–97] 1998, p.100).

And if Tan was willing to legitimize the power-seeking "barbarians" for natural feet, he was certainly passionate about "great men" who in the role of "roving swordsmen" led popular rebellions or acted as avengers on the trail of the people's oppressors: "[I]n the age of autocracy, roving swordsmen alone can help us to

arouse ourselves, and to prevent the people from becoming more and more benighted, weak and degenerate." Indeed, he emphasized, patriots and men of benevolence should all follow the examples of Chen She 陳涉 (?–208 BC) and Yang Xuangan 楊玄感 (?–613 AD) (Chan 1984, p.164; also see Schäfer 1997, p.96). Naturally, like his friends Liang Qichao and Wang Kangnian 汪康年 (1860–1911), he was on the "people's" side, as reformers held different views on the nature of the monarchy in political reform (Zarrow 2002, p.22). In fact, at his most vehement moments, despite his reformist identity and his assumption that revolution was culturally premature for the Chinese, he embraced revolution as the path to the betterment of a backward, barbaric China.

Working for China and the World

In addition to working for Chinese individuals' right to self-expression, Tan's historical agency, blessed with its non-dualistic mindset, was prepared to reach out to the world.

Connecting China to the West

By reaching out to the world, those who dwelled in the truth of non-differentiation would contribute to China's self-strengthening, a major concern for modern Chinese thinkers (Chan, 1985; Wang Yue, 1990). In Tan's analysis, to uproot the backwardness of their country, the Chinese should defy their tradition's dualistic preference for quietude, which he assumed originated in the *Laozi*. In addition to stifling the individual, quietude also weakened the nation (see note 16). The prevalence of the concept of quietude led to the situation that government offices at all levels committed themselves, day and night, "to the [interrelated] tasks of restricting four hundred million Chinese people's movements and smothering their

vitality." He condemned the political elite for "tying up the people, covering their eyes and ears, and forcing them to conform to the rule of blind obedience" (Tan [1896-97] 1998, p.134).

Precisely because of the elite's advocacy of quietude, Tan observed, China lagged behind Western nations in the modern period. While voicing his concern for the socio-economic inequality of capitalist society in his letter to Tang Caichang 唐才常 1867-1900 (Tan [1896] 1981, pp.249-50), he remained enthusiastic about the success of the modern West, which for him was marked by an adventurous spirit: Westerners accumulated an incredible amount of wealth and achieved hegemony over the world, as they aggressively pursued profits, creatively designed machines, and tirelessly opened overseas market (Tan [1896-97] 1998, pp.134, 142-43, 149). Therefore, to some extent, *Renxue* shared with other late Qing reformist writings the idea that China had to defend and strengthen itself in a mercantilist framework (Zanasi 2006, p.26).

To further encourage the Chinese to learn from the West, Tan emphasized that they had to put aside their strong sense of self-other distinction in emulating Westerners. Sharing with other reformists the assumption that local initiatives designed by elites at the provincial and county level were essential for a strong nation (Murthy 2008, p.156), Tan entreated cultural conservatives in Hunan to move beyond their dualistic-ethnocentric worldview to learn more about the world (Tan [1896-97] 1998, p.91). And echoing a long letter to an old friend written in the wake of the First Sino-Japanese War (Tan [1895] 1981, pp.196-230), *Renxue* critiqued Chinese conservatives: "In recent decades, reflecting on foreign relations, scholars and members of the gentry class...all support such policies as isolationism and a ban on maritime trade." "How

anti-benevolent their attitude is!" he cried (Tan [1896–97] 1998, p.87).

Applying the concept of interconnectivity, Tan not only implored the Chinese to give up self-other distinction to explore Western culture, but also commended Western imperialists on their interest in coming to China. Dazzled by the dynamism unleashed by modern Western imperialism, and frustrated by the cultural conservatives' refusal to link China to the outside world, Tan interpreted, or rather misinterpreted, as benevolence various forms of imperialist activities, including commerce, missionary work, and even military actions. All this, he said, originated in Westerners' benevolent intention to connect to and help the Chinese (Tan [1896–67] 1998, pp.134, 148–49). Regarding both Chinese modernizers and Western imperialists as benevolent, he was ready to reason with and even suppress those ignorant people who opposed modernization. This intention was made clear in his short letter to Liang Qichao and Wang Kangnian, when he discussed the reform movements in Guangdong, Guangxi, and Hunan (Tan [1897] 1981, pp.516–17). Though his tone was not as militant as the one he used in his discussion on the tyrants, he expressed the same view that historical agents of interconnectivity who worked hard to connect China to the world were entitled to purge people obstructing their goal.

Blurring national boundaries

Tan Sitong also expected, however, that historical agents freed from the analytical and discriminating mode and self-other distinction would commit themselves equally to those who were related to them and those who were not. In this respect, he echoed a considerable number of modern Chinese thinkers who expressed their cosmopolitan commitment to other races or humankind (Hsiao, 1975; Karl, 2002). For his

cosmopolitanism, Tan appreciated Mozi, in spite of his disapproval of the Mohist dualistic emphasis on frugality (Tan [1896–97] 1998, p.67). Thinking about relationships between nations, he asserted: "All those who seek to save the world from the cataclysmic advent of the kalpa (*yixin wanjie* 以心挽劫) vow to save their own nation(s), the modern West, and all sentient beings." In addition, he also hailed Jesus as a model for practicing non-differentiating love: "Jesus founded the Kingdom of God, loving all countries as his own and embracing their peoples" (Tan [1896–97] 1998, p.219).

But in *Renxue*, what follows his praise of Jesus is a discussion on why Westerners should help the non-West and how they could do so. While Tan did not dismiss imperialism, he was embittered by Western nations' highhandedness in the non-West: "Their aggressiveness and deceptiveness have bred mistrust between nations" (translation [modified] from Chan, 1984, p.197). And he surmised that powerful nations' abusive attitude toward weak nations would lead to their own decay. Therefore, he urged Westerners to mend their ways to save themselves and the non-West. Calling attention to self-other unity once again, he made the following suggestions to the West: "[Westerners] should show their genuine concern about others, taking the initiative to change weaker nations, overthrowing their monarchs..., establishing democracy, supporting others' independence, and helping them to survive" (Tan [1896–97] 1998, pp.220–21). In addition, he recommended that strong nations work together to build a railway linking Europe and Asia, and estimated that the benefits promised by this project would promote sympathy and understanding among China and foreign nations.

Tan did not show a great deal of interest in the question of how the non-West could contribute to the interconnectivity of the world, despite his emphasis

that "[a]ll those who seek to save the world from the cataclysmic advent of *kalpa* vow...to save the modern West." When he did discuss the question, he seemed to assume that non-Western nations could recover the interconnectivity between nations by pursuing power. He made the following recommendation to the Chinese: "We should apply our mental power to the project of national self-strengthening." In order to succeed, Tan said, confident about the utilitarian value of eradicating the self-other distinction, the Chinese should listen to Jesus, who advocated the ideal that "one should treat one's enemies as friends" (Tan [1896-97] 1998, p.222). Obviously, though aware of the significance of the concept of interconnectivity for the theory and praxis of international affairs, Tan remained a patriot, more interested in how self-other unity would help his country (and other weak nations) than how it would contribute to the West. (15)

But still, Tan cared to move beyond China to envision what kind of future humans' release from the analytical mental frame would lead the world into. Attracted to the concept of great unity (*datong* 大同) in the *Liyun* 禮運 chapter of the Confucian classic *Liji* 禮記, he imagined it to be a world where no nation would exist: "The peace of our globe is defined by the disappearance of nations.... It is by having a world without nations that all humans will be able to enjoy self-autonomy, that peoples will not draw national boundaries, that military conflicts and hatred will not exist...and that equality will prevail..." (Tan [1896-97] 1998, p.235).

But as Tan described the future world further, the language he employed sounded almost purely Buddhist: The world will evolve into a land of bliss when "Maitreya descends to the earth, Vimalakirti leaves his sickbed, people are affluent and content...." (Tan [1896-97] 1998, p.232). More interestingly, he was not content with a Buddhist paradise on earth. He

continued, "[One day] most sentient beings will attain Buddhahood." He predicted, "Those who have not will become Buddhas when the earth is about to evaporate." This was because, he assumed, history at that moment fulfills its destiny—the full manifestation of benevolence, characterized by physically distinguishable beings' evolution into formlessness, which allowed them to go and live anywhere: "When sentient beings are not chained by their karma, the globe is not chained by its own karma. And when all sentient beings transcend their bodies, the globe lets go its physical existence" (Tan [1896–97] 1998, p.232).

Spirituality and Human Agency

Spiritual journey

Imagining the creative power of benevolent historical agency, Tan Sitong presumed that freedom from an analytical and discriminating mode meant liberation from a finite mind, which had been imprisoned in the illusory delight of the senses, the false allure of egotism boosted by wealth and fame, and, perhaps most importantly, the selves at all personal, social-political, national, and cultural levels. In *Renxue*, benevolent historical agents are able to unleash their mental power, in the sense that their flexibility, compassion, and cosmopolitan outlook allowed them to do a lot for Chinese individuals, the nation, and the world: They distance themselves from notions and institutions that harm individuals, and support the creation of a new egalitarian social structure; they work to rid China of its poverty and backwardness with their capacity for communicating with foreign nations and cultures; and they promise create a world without nations and, eventually, one without form. Picturing the "historical creativity" of his beloved historical agents, Tan summoned up an image strikingly similar to a Buddhist-style liberated person, who, according to Peter

Harvey, has a "boundariless mind" as he releases himself from all things and all forms of attachment (Harvey, 2007).

But for his knowledge about spiritual pursuit and his own experience, Tan fully understood that a boundariless mind was not something within reach, and that Buddhahood for all was a very remote goal (Tan [1896] 1981, p.461; Tan, [1897] 1981, p.260). Viewing spiritual quest as a prolonged process, he thought it useful to integrate a discussion on it in his theory on historical agency.

Influenced by the Mind-only sect, Tan Sitong identified consciousness (*shi* 識), divided into eight categories, as the factor that shaped humans' understanding of their experiences and the world. He stressed that the transformation of all categories was the necessary condition for enlightenment (Tan [1896-97] 1998, pp.157-59, 227-29). And he also employed the Mind-only school's theory on the four wisdoms (*sizhi* 四智) to analyze Confucius's autobiographical account—how the sage progressed from setting his mind on learning at the age of fifteen to conducting himself spontaneously but properly at the age of seventy. According to Tan Sitong, when Confucius freed himself from doubts (*buhuo* 不惑) at the age of forty, he gained the Wisdom of Profound Contemplation. When his ear was "attuned" at the age of sixty, he obtained the Wisdom of Universal Equality. At the age of seventy, Confucius successfully reshaped his store consciousness into the Wisdom of the Great Mirror (*da yuanjing zhi* 大圓鏡智), which liberated him completely from the analytical mental mode, and allowed him to attain profound equanimity.

Aware of the protractedness of spiritual pursuit but confident about the efficacy of the non-differentiating

mind, Tan also assessed the power that people could wield with varied levels of spiritual accomplishment.

Omnipotence of the benevolent ones

According to *Renxue*, even ordinary humans could make an impact if they are willing to implement the notion of self-other non-differentiation—i.e., if they attempted to purge their craftiness (*jixin* 機心). Trusting and compassionate in dealing with others, they could influence non-benevolent people, helping them to refine their undesirable character. Tan was eager to show how ingenuousness would win the hearts of others. He recommended to his readers the following experiment: "Upon meeting a person who has a calculating mind, you may attempt to cleanse yourself of all self-centered motives and cunningness, and strive to be compassionate. You will [gradually] become unaware of the other side's cunningness and dishonesty. This person will then respond with integrity, as you do not respond to his calculating side. Try this on a couple of persons, and [I am sure that] the effect will be immediate, and [that] your mental power will develop quickly." But more importantly, the social agents inspired by *ren* can reshape others because, by disengaging themselves from the hectic life of self-oriented pursuits, they show the potential of developing to perfection the ideal of generosity: Since they fearlessly (*wuwei* 無畏) give away what they have for the benefit of others, others, under their influence, will abandon their deceitful ways (Tan [1896–97] 1998, p.218).

If the world would change when ordinary people set their minds to implement non-differentiation, all the more so when enlightened beings engage the full complexity of the mundane realm. Therefore, to further his readers' understanding of the power to be let loose

by spiritual practice, Tan Sitong also described colorfully the spiritually advanced.

Although Tan disapproved what he viewed as Laozi's definition of quietude (16), he imagined quietude to be a quality marking spiritually advanced historical agents. In his analysis, blessed with quietude, spiritually developed agents are superlatively sensitive to all phenomena that emerge and evolve across the universe. To describe their omnipotence, Tan borrowed from *Commentary on the Appended Phrases of the Yijing*: "Being utterly still, it does not initiate movement. But when stimulated, it is commensurate with all the causes for everything that happens in the world" (Lynn 1994, p.63). But while the *Yijing* provide details, including the lively example of Lord Bao Xi 包犧氏, to illustrate what it means for humans who are able to connect to the world, Tan in his masterpiece chose to describe the vivid image of a mind commensurate with the world in a Mahayana framework, blending Buddhist doctrinal discussion of the spiritual path with the belief in the superhuman qualities of the Buddha and advanced Bodhisattvas (Gomez 1987, pp.141–91; Harvey 1990, pp.121–24; Zhiru 2007, p.18). In chapter 5 of *Renxue*, to depict the omnipotence rooted in the kind of quietude attained by benevolent agents for their deep understanding of non-differentiation, Tan spotlighted the founder of Buddhism, the Sakyamuni Buddha, who possessed an extremely penetrating form of mind-reading (*taxintong* 他心通): "The Buddha said, 'I know it when a simple idea arises in a sentient being's mind.... I can also count accurately the number of raindrops'" (Tan [1896–97] 1998, p.89; for other supernatural deeds of the Buddha, see my discussion above on his communicative power, and also see my discussion below).

Limiting the omnipotence of the benevolent ones

Upon glorifying the miraculous influence of the benevolent beings, however, Tan also de-glorified it in certain ways. Knowing that one's ability to shape human affairs was dependent on one's spiritual progress, which was a long-term process, he felt it necessary to address a question that he thought would surely be raised by readers: Should the pursuers of benevolence prioritize the spiritual deliverance of self from suffering (*duji* 度己) or the project of saving others (*duren* 度人)? He offered his answer in the last two chapters of *Renxue*. For him, the raising of this question shows a mind that differentiates self and others. He stressed: "Self could not be divorced from others, and others could not be severed from self. Therefore, the efforts to deliver oneself from suffering are the same as efforts to deliver others, and the efforts to save others from suffering are merely the same as the efforts to help oneself" (Tan [1896–97] 1998, p.243).

In illuminating how one's spiritual quest could contribute to others, Tan pointed out that when one undertook spiritual practices in the solitude of mountains, one could, upon purifying one's mind source (*xinyuan* 心源), purify all sentient beings. And he did not intend to picture compassionate agents as wonder workers towering above others as saviors of the world, as he also stressed the significance of saving others for self: Either by assisting others in small matters, or by leading others to the other shore, he said, the helpers could accumulate innumerable merits (*gongde* 功德) for themselves (Tan [1896–97] 1998, p.243).

In fact, *Renxue* provides another reason for Tan's attempt to diminish omnipotent compassionate beings. Following the Buddhist logic of self-other non-distinction to its end, Tan Sitong argued, "They [all unenlightened sentient beings] live inside the Buddha,

and the Buddha lives inside them." Moreover, Tan summarized two well-known stories from the Buddhist tradition, one about the historical Buddha and the other about the mother of Moggallana: Whereas the former with deep wisdom saw and represented successfully to others the world as a majestic place with radiant golden light, the latter for her bad karma could not have a decent meal because food turned into fire whenever she was about to eat it. Tan then asserted that sentient beings' salvation was determined not by the enlightened ones, but by themselves—to be exact, by "how they perceive the world" (Tan [1896–97] 1998, p.245).

By taking into account the importance of a purified mind for the purification of the world, the Buddha nature of all sentient beings, and, last but not least, numberless sentient beings' numberless false views, Tan then stressed the paradoxical—complete and yet incomplete—nature of the task of ferrying others across the ocean of miseries. In the last chapter of *Renxue*, he asserted, "[The compassionate ones] always succeed in their mission of delivering sentient beings from suffering. But they also fail" (Tan [1896–97] 1998, p.245).

To conclude, in the final passage of *Renxue*, Tan appropriated the last hexagram of the *Yijing*, *weiji* 未濟, meaning "ferrying incomplete." He said, "The evolution of the world (*tianxia dashi* 天下大勢) can be compared to the course of a great river, which never ceases to flow." Tan did not explain explicitly why he chose *weiji*. It seems, however, that as a Buddhist-eclectic thinker, he saw in the *Yijing*'s last hexagram a fitting image for the conclusion of his book: A river flowing eternally is a powerful metaphor for the compassionate agents' undertaking to save sentient beings. (17) Just as a river is geographically conditioned to flow in a certain direction, their efforts are predetermined to move toward success (as sentient beings are endowed with

Buddha nature). But just as a river will never dry up, their project will never end (Tan [1896–97] 1998, pp.245–46).

Conclusion

Contemplating non-differentiation, Tan Sitong positioned himself as a Buddhist eclectic. While appropriating various non-Buddhist religious, philosophical, and ideological sources to shed light on the truth of non-differentiation and lavishing praise on them, he also appraised them, introduced a vision of social-political change to which other sources—including Confucianism, considered by him to be as profound as Buddhism—could not easily accommodate, and was inclined to favor Buddhism in his discussion on significant topics. With his eclecticism that treated Buddhism as a decentered center, Tan pondered the creative power of a non-analytical, non-discriminating mind: Not only did he explain how such a mind could help historical actors liberate themselves as individuals, but he also discussed how it could help them to fulfill agendas beyond their own selves. In addition, delving into non-differentiation, Tan assigned to benevolent historical agents an intricate role in history, one whose omnipotence promised to change and even fundamentally reshape historical realities but whose power was forged by the world it aimed to help.

Tan Sitong has been known as an unclear, immature thinker. On that point I can agree to a certain extent, after analyzing his exploration into the issue of non-differentiation. As I point out, Tan sometimes expressed views that undercut the principle of interconnectivity that he embraced. His nationalism was responsible for the fact that by rejecting in earnest those cultural conservatives blocking the project of modernization, he lost his patience and forgot his own

appreciation of tolerance as the path to interconnectivity. And the idea of tolerance was brushed aside when, out of sympathy for myriad suffering individuals, he entertained the use of violence in eliminating oppressive social-political authorities in China. Moreover, Tan's Buddhist eclecticism is a controversial choice. Did his identification of Buddhism as the highest of all religions reflect his analytical and discriminating mind? Or did his Buddhist eclecticism reflect his theory of non-differentiation?

Whatever observers' answers are, what is undeniable is how, despite his inconsistencies, Tan exerted himself to maintain coherence of his own thought. As far as his exposition of non-differentiation was concerned, he tried very hard to follow through with the task of excavating the ontological and especially social-political meanings of non-differentiation to build a Buddhist-eclectic historical agency beneficial for Chinese individuals, China, and the world, and to generalize about the capacity and historical limitations of this human agency.

Tan Sitong in Chinese history

Tan Sitong's *Renxue* presses scholars to reflect on the complexity of modern Chinese Buddhism. Modern Chinese historical actors who intended to draw upon Buddhism to address the issues of modernity inherited a cultural legacy of which Buddhism was only a part. Like Tan, thinkers such as Kang Youwei and Zhang Taiyan 章太炎 (1869–1936) reinvented Buddhism under the influence of non-Buddhist religions and philosophies. Therefore, not unlike many pre-modern thinkers, they felt compelled to contemplate how they could appropriate various sources when they developed their own thought, and to think about the place of Buddhism in relation to other religious and/or philosophical trends. For this reason, such concepts as syncretism and

eclecticism, employed by scholars to examine the interaction between Buddhism and non-Buddhist cultural elements (Berling, 1980; Yu, 1988; Lo, 2008), are also highly relevant to scholarship on modern Chinese Buddhism. How was Buddhism treated by modern Chinese thinkers who appreciated not only Buddhism but other traditions? Were they Buddhist, Confucian, or Daoist syncretists? Were they eclectics? How so? To explore these questions is to deepen our understanding of the role played by Buddhism in a course of modernity situated in a context where various traditions were alive and made themselves available for reinvention.

In addition, this analysis of *Renxue* encourages some serious rethinking of its author. In his influential interpretation of Tan Sitong, Chang Hao remarks that Tan's vision of reality, marked by an emphasis on organic oneness, "militates against any concept of individuality, multiplicity, or indeed distinction of any sort" (Chang 1987, p.88). With due respect, I would argue that Chang's observation does not do justice to Tan's thought. Regarding how the cohesion of the world could emerge, Tan opted for the kind of oneness that did not exclude individuality and distinction: He argued for the individual's right to self-expression as a basic condition for interconnectivity, therefore demanding social and political superiors' recognition of others as individuals, and requesting the government's tolerance for individuals' preferences and desires. What lies behind this vision of oneness is the idea that interconnectivity of the human world necessitates an acceptance, not a lack, of distinction. (18) Tan's approach to social-political cohesion calls for more attention to how reinvented Chinese traditions show the capacity for relevance to the contemporary issues of diversity, difference, and unity, which continue to be hotly debated at local, national, regional, and global levels.

Tan Sitong in the contemporary world

To further discuss the case of Tan Sitong, I would like to situate him in the emerging global trend of Engaged Buddhism. Not only did his attempt to build a historical agency capable of addressing problems of modernity foreshadow the work of such Buddhist "luminaries" as Thich Nhat Hanh, Sulak Sivaraksa, and A. T. Ariyaratne, but also his invocation of interconnectivity prefigured many contemporary Buddhists' use of interdependence as a tenet for their social, cultural, and political agendas. And as a form of intellectual cross-fertilization, his Buddhist eclecticism heralded many contemporary Engaged Buddhists' interest in cross-cultural/interfaith dialogues. To be sure, parts of Tan's thought in *Renxue*, such as his legitimation of desires and advocacy of capitalist-imperialist economy, could not be more different from typical contemporary Engaged Buddhist thinking, which readily falls into the category of alternative and/or critical modernity. But I would argue that his support for individualism and capitalism reveals the historicized ductility and versatility of the notion of interconnectivity. Although Tan's enthusiasm for capitalism and defense of desires cannot be considered Buddhist in a strict sense, his thought unfolded in a context where he witnessed the agonies of many Chinese individuals and of their nation. For this reason, it seems, he may not have entirely gone against the Mahayana goal of alleviating suffering. Indeed, the social-political application of the notion of interdependence is determined by the thinker and the time to which he or she responds.

I would contend, in addition, that Tan's theorization on the spiritual dimension of human agency deserves attention from both activists and scholars who take part in debates over the nature of Engaged Buddhism. One crucial issue in such ongoing debates is whether Engaged Buddhists should give precedence to personal

spiritual transformation when so many people suffer all kinds of oppression and injustice. At this point, researchers concur that the fusion of spiritual practice with action for change marks Engaged Buddhism (Queen 2003, pp.1-35). But still, their discussion of the spiritual side of Engaged Buddhism sometimes seems inadequate. Among Engaged Buddhists, some—for instance, Thich Nhat Hanh—show a commitment to high-level spirituality (Nhat Hanh, 2003). But there is no lack of eager Engaged Buddhists who, though regarding spiritual exercises as useful, choose to highlight the primacy of the actions of helping others. In such cases, spiritual exercises are sometimes quickly reduced to tools enhancing their efficacy in certain areas of work, or to intellectual space for them to critique the world (for examples, see Queen 2003, pp.27-28). Like them, Tan Sitong recognized the urgency of the faith-based agency's mission. But unlike them, he emphasized the non-differentiation between faith-based agency and the sentient beings it intended to save (in his own terminology, the non-differentiation between delivering self and delivering others). Not only does *Renxue* challenge Engaged Buddhists to examine their own tendency to differentiate themselves from—or to elevate themselves above—others; it also endorses but de-prioritizes salvational projects oriented towards the world. In so doing, Tan unknowingly encourages contemporary activists to give themselves a little more time and space for imagination, contemplating the relationship between spiritual self-improvement and improvement of what is beyond oneself—i.e. the question of how the rescue of others can be assisted by one's spiritual growth.

To be sure, Tan Sitong's Mahayana invocation of the fantastic imagery of the Buddha and the Bodhisattvas could appear too "superstitious" for some modernized (and sometimes modernist) Buddhist activists. (19) While *Renxue* won the admiration of Taixu, who, despite

his identity as the Buddhist modernizer *par excellence*, believed in the extraordinary powers of the spiritually accomplished (Taixu, [1913] 1995; Tao, 2002), some contemporary Engaged Buddhists may not find the concept of supersensory powers credible. In fact, in *Renxue*, as far as Buddhism was concerned, Tan never intended to separate his identity as a man of science from his identity as a man of faith. (20) As he showed no interest in bifurcating the miraculous and the scientific, or in dichotomizing the human and the divine, he set himself apart from some modernist Buddhist-inspired thinkers: Zhang Taiyan, for one, was highly suspicious of those superhuman qualities associated with images of enlightened beings. (21) But Tan Sitong's assertion of the link between the deepening of spiritual quest and the power of activism deserves recognition, for it reminds scholars of those who have arduously explored the meanings of spiritual pursuit for action, and encourages action-oriented Buddhists to explore the potency of advanced spirituality.

Notes

1. For an early example of such scholarship, see Pittman, 2001, pp.296–97.

2. *Renxue* is by far the most important work among Tan's writings, in both substance and influence. However, I shall also heed other writings by Tan that were relevant to the formation of *Renxue*.

3. According to Luke Kwong, *Renxue* named Buddhism as the highest of all religions (Kwong, 1996, p.53). But Kwong does not explore in detail whether or how Tan attempted to compare and contrast the three, while showing appreciation for all of them. Chang Hao tends to highlight the synthetic nature of Tan's thought, but also notes that occasionally he moved beyond his Confucian/neo-Confucian learning to formulate his thought from a Buddhist viewpoint (Chang, 1987, p.88). According to Taiwan scholar Wu Kunru, Tan used

Confucian, Buddhist, and Christian ideas from the Confucian position (1998).

4. It should be noted that while I basically follow Berling's definitions, I do not totally agree with the seemingly negative tone with which she reflects on eclecticism. In her work, in addition to being whimsical and idiosyncratic, eclecticism, marked by randomness, is also thoughtless. While Tan Sitong's interpretation of various trends, based on his understanding of non-differentiation, could be regarded as whimsical and idiosyncratic, I find it controversial to attach the label "thoughtlessness" to him (see conclusion of this paper). As I shall show, he tried extremely hard to follow through the logic non-differentiation in the *Renxue*, as he appraised various trends. But I agree with Berling that his signature piece is a kind of "bold experimentation" (Berling, 1980, pp.4–13).

5. A well-studied case is Kang Youwei, who advocated religions out of practical political considerations and his own interest in pleasure (Hsiao, 1975, pp.109, 164–65). Another example is Zhang Taiyan, who invoked Buddhism to invent the individual capable of fighting for a new China. He also employed Buddhism to support revolutionary politics and argue for a non-capitalist path toward the construction of the modern Chinese nation-state (Zhang, [1907] 1995; Wang Wei, 2004, pp.607–8; Murthy, 2008, p.163). But when his comrades cast doubt on his use of Buddhist-based historical agency for the anti-Manchu/anti-Qing cause (Su, 2007, p.140), he gave up his once-enthusiastic advocacy of Buddhist-based revolutionary agency after a brief resistance lest he undermine the revolutionary camp's solidarity. It is also believed that he later repositioned himself as a researcher of Buddhism and, in the final stage of his life, refused to elevate Buddhism above Confucianism and Daoism (Li Qingxin, 1999, pp.109–64). Also see note 21 of this paper.

6. Although Yang Wenhui identified Buddhism in a highly utilitarian fashion as the religion that could help secure China's status in the world, he was a devout practitioner of the faith. At the age of thirty-seven, he declined an invitation from Li Hongzhang 李鴻章 (1823–1901), the governor of Chili, who tried to solicit

his help, and roamed southeast China to collect sutras until he had to take up another position to sustain his family. Moreover, as Buddhist-inspired activists, pragmatic or not, appropriated Buddhist values and ideas for their goals, the use of Buddhism implied a certain degree of attraction to Buddhism as a religion and philosophy. When Zhang Taiyan was enthralled by the possible contribution Buddhism could make to his cause, he not only deeply appreciated the Buddhist view on human existence, but also avowed a fervent hope to become a monk!

7. In the high Qing, despite the prevalent trend of textual analysis, some scholars refused to give up their quest for philosophical purpose and committed themselves to Buddhism in pursuing self-cultivation. And obviously Peng Shaosheng chose a Buddhist identity when China's self-strengthening and survival was not a pressing concern. Though a marginalized voice, Peng and his friends and disciples influenced scholars of a later generation, including Wei Yuan 魏源 (1794–1856), a New Text scholar who did not shy away from expressing his view that Buddhism was better than Confucianism.

8. Here is Watson's translation of the sentence: "But where there is birth there must be death; where there is death there must be birth" (Watson, 1968, p.39). I do not follow his translation, as I take into account how Tan responded to the statement.

9. In Burton Watson's translated version of the *Zhuangzi*, the phrase is situated in this passage: "Confucius said, 'Life, death, preservation, loss, failure, success, poverty, riches, worthiness, and unworthiness, slander, fame, hunger, thirst, cold, heat—these are the alternations of the world, the workings of fate. Day and night they change place before us and wisdom cannot spy out their sources.'" The fictitious Confucius here is represented as a wise man talking to Duke Ai of Lu. And in another dialogue that precedes this one, Confucius has a conversation with No-Toes, who thinks that his conversation partner has not yet reached the state of a Perfect Man (Watson, 1968, pp.71–74).

10. While Confucius's view on rituals, as interpreted by Tan to support non-differentiation, is relevant to the issue of continuity of time, Tan did not use it to reflect on the interpenetration between temporal units.

11. In this respect, Tan was echoed by his good friend Tang Caichang 唐才常 (1867–1900), who relied on the concept of *tong* to assert that the Chinese must interconnect with the world by understanding it and trading with other countries (Ding, 2004, p.78).

12. Other modern Chinese Buddhists reflected on the gender issue as well. For their discussion on it in the early twentieth century, see Yuan Yuan's article in this issue.

13. Tan's body-soul distinction can be easily interpreted as a kind of dualism. However, it should be noted that he not only recognized the difference between body and soul, but also pointed to their similarity—they were both made of ether.

14. According to Chang Hao, regarding human relationships, Tan viewed Buddhism and Confucianism as the same, while thinking that Buddhism was better than Christianity (Chang, 1987, p.102). I disagree, and think that Chang does not pay much attention to how Tan expanded on the magnificent ways in which the Buddha connected to others.

15. I disagree with some scholars' portrayal of Tan as a thinker lacking nationalism (see Chang, 1987, p.97).

16. Tan's criticism of Daoist quietude could be viewed as erroneous. According to some scholars, in the *Laozi*, quietude is conceptualized as a quality empowering its owner. For an analysis of the issue, see Ames and Hall, 2003, pp.11–54.

17. The judgment of *weiji* is that a young fox crosses the river but it gets its tail wet.

18. Here are a couple of minor but relevant points. First, although Tan's future world where sentient beings are released from bodily existences seems to match the kind of wholeness suggested by Chang, he did not say that souls as formless existences lack individuality. Second,

by imagining how souls could go anywhere at will, he seemed to imply that souls would enjoy more personal freedom (at least the freedom of movement) than bodies would.

19. For the definition of "modernist" in the context of Engaged Buddhism scholarship, see Yarnall, 2003, pp.286–44.

20. It should be noted that Tan sounded modernist at times. He was critical of some traditional concepts and practices that he thought went against modern science. One good example is his distaste for geomancy and the concepts of *yin* and *yang*, which are essential for the exegetical tradition of the *Yijing* (Tan [1897] 1981, p.506).

21. Wang Hui states that Zhang talked about the social and political significance of religion on the foundation of atheism. See Wang Hui, 2004, p.1,081. Others have long noted that Zhang regarded religious worship, aimed at the salvation promised by the enlightened beings' supersensory powers, as a problematic practice. In a recent work on Zhang, the author points out that Zhang sounded critical of both the Pure Land School and Tibetan Buddhism. See Su, 2007, p.159. In a piece written in 1906, Zhang rationalized and secularized the worship of the Buddha: "[T]he worship of the Buddha is based on the fact that he historically existed 2600 years ago, lived in this world, and left a legacy which has remained relevant to this day. We worship him as our teacher, but not as a supernatural being.." See Zhang [1906] 1995, pp.32–52.

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